DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 616 JC 920 001

TITLE Campus Hearings of the Joint Committee on Transfer Students. Summary Report.
INSTITUTION Virginia State Council of Higher Education, Richmond.; Virginia State Dept. of Community Colleges, Richmond.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; *Articulation (Education); College Credits; *College Transfer Students; Community Colleges; Higher Education; Intercollegiate Cooperation; Self Evaluation (Groups); *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Transfer Policy; *Transfer Programs; Two Year Colleges; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *Virginia

ABSTRACT

In October 1990, the Virginia Council of Higher Education and the State Board for Community Colleges established a 10-member Joint Committee on Transfer Students (JCTS) to develop transfer agreements between the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and four-year institutions in the state, and to report on the progress and performance of transfer students at four-year schools. In order to collect information on the types of problems confronting transfer students, the JCTS conducted focus-group hearings during March and April 1991 at five sites statewide, involving over 90 counselors, administrators, and faculty members. In addition, 58 students, including transfer students from 16 of VCCS's 23 colleges, participated in the focus groups. An analysis of summaries from the focus-group hearings revealed the following: (1) the most frequently cited reason for choosing a particular senior institution was that it was the only school offering the program the student was seeking, or that it had the best reputation in the student's chosen field; (2) the most consistently positive theme from the hearings was the availability of transfer guides, developed by four-year institutions to assist two-year college students in planning their program of study; (3) college personnel indicated significant difficulty in providing students with information in a timely manner; (4) students underscored the need for better communication between students and personnel, particularly advisors, at two- and four-year institutions; (5) shortcomings of articulation agreements included their lack of uniformity and their tendency to become outdated; and (6) of the transfer students interviewed, 57% had graduated from a two-year college. (PAA)

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Summary Report:

CAMPUS HEARINGS

of the

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSFER STUDENTS

Virginia Community College System

Council of Higher Education for Virginia

MAY 1991

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Introduction

In October, 1990, the Council of Higher Education and the State Board for Community Colleges named a ten-member committee to study student transfer from the Commonwealth's two-year to four-year institutions. Membership on the committee includes four faculty members and six administrators.

The Joint Committee on Transfer Students (JCTS) is charged with developing transfer agreements between the Virginia Community College System and the state's senior colleges and universities and with reporting on the progress and performance of transfer students at four-year institutions.

At its first meeting, the committee realized that few data were available to assist them in identifying the types of problems, if any, that confront transfer students. To collect this information, the JCTS conducted hearings on community-college student transfer at five locations around the state during late March and early April, 1991.

The meetings, which consisted of two focus groups and an open forum at each site, were held at Virginia Commonwealth University (in cooperation with John Tyler Community College), Old Dominion University (in cooperation with Norfolk State University and Tidewater Community College), Northern Virginia Community College
(in cooperation with George Mason University), James Madison Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (in cooperation
with Piedmont Virginia Community College), and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (in cooperation with Central Virginia Community College).

Over 90 counselors, administrators, and faculty members attended five focus-group sessions to offer their perspectives on student transfer. Fifty-eight students (representing transfers from 16 of 23 of Virginia's community colleges) participated in the focus-group discussions for transfers. At the focus groups, a series of questions designed by the Joint Committee was asked of the participants. These discussions lasted from one to one-and-a -half hours each. Participation in the open forums varied by site, from one person testifying at one location to 10 presenters, one letter, and one petition at another location.

The hearings were recorded on audiotape and by notetakers. Each notetaker prepared a summary of points made at the hearing. These summaries were then analyzed for consistent themes, important points, and identifiable problem areas and consensus on what steps might be taken to improve student transfer.

This document highlights major findings from the hearings. Through discussion of these themes, the committee hopes to reach consensus on what steps might be taken to improve student transfer in Virginia. The JCTS will continue its work through the 1991-92 academic year, culminating in recommendations to be adopted by the Council of Higher Education and the State Board for Community Colleges.

Any comments or questions can be directed to committee or staff members listed on the inside front cover.

Joint Committee on Transfer Students
May 1991

The Students. The students interviewed at the hearings described various reasons for beginning their studies at community colleges: several were poorly motivated in high school and therefore had grades too low to gain admission initially to a four-year institution; the cost and location of the community college was attractive; community colleges appeared to students to be more accommodating to the needs of adult learners; and a large number simply wanted to "get grounded" before transferring.

Somewhat surprisingly, their reasons for choosing their senior institutions were less likely to be based upon convenience and cost. The most frequently cited reason was that the senior institution was the only university offering the program they were interested in or that it had the best reputation in that field. Family ties, the availability of financial aid, and the ease of transfer also were mentioned.

Transfer of Credit. In general, students felt well informed about whether their community-college credits would transfer. Although there was some confusion about specific courses, especially in mathematics, students in the focus groups said they were well apprised of what was transferable. Students did note losing everywhere from a few to many credits (generally from AAS-degree programs), having to retake some courses assigned 200-level numbers at the community colleges that were designated as 300-level at the senior institution, and having some courses transfer only as electives. Other problems arose because of the semester-conversion process and because of confusion over which version of the senior-college catalog would govern a student's graduation requirements.

Institutions that accept fewer transfer students seem to leave some room open for negotiation of transfer credit. Several students said they "got the run-around" about whether certain courses would be accepted. Some described

specific instances where they were sent from one office to another, and then received contradictory answers. Students ascribed this to the fact that at the university, "the answers are all over the place, whereas at community colleges, the answers are in one place."

In at least one open forum the committee heard from community-college students who are currently enrolled in AAS programs who were chagrined to learn that their program was not transferable, even though one or more four-year institution offered a baccalaureate degree in their curriculum (e.g., early childhood education, architecture, and hotel and restaurant management). These students admitted that they initially only wanted job training, but that once they realized they could go further with their education, they did not understand why "college was not college."

Transfer Guides. The most consistently positive theme of the hearings was the availability of what are known as transfer guides. Transfer guides are developed by each four-year institution to assist two-year college students in planning their program of study for transfer. Typically the guides recommend what a potential transfer student should take in general education and for specific majors, and they often list the community-college course equivalencies at the senior college. The guides were mentioned by counselors, faculty, administrators, and students at every site as a primary source of information in preparing to transfer. In response to the question, "What advice would you give to a community-college student who is considering transfer?" students responded most frequently that they would tell them to read the transfer guides and college catalogs.

The transfer guides take on additional importance where they are used by senior colleges as the basis for doing credit evaluation. At several campuses, students are not encouraged to speak to department heads about course transferability since they might make promises at variance with the guide.

As with all good things, the guides have their detractors. Several students said they had not known of the existence of the guides. Some said that

although it was helpful to know what courses would transfer, the guides are less clear about how the credits will be applied (e.g., as equivalent to a senior-college course or as a free elective). Finally, counselors reported that the guides sometimes arrive too late in the fall to be helpful in planning students' course schedules.

Although most praised the guides, many community-college personnel offered the same suggestions for improvement: consistency. Radford University's guide, for instance, was cited as exemplary in explaining general-education requirements but as weak in program-specific requirements. Virginia Tech's guide is clear regarding program requirements but vague on general education. Several recommended that all senior institutions follow George Mason's lead in developing "program sheets," which spell out the courses that a student should take in every program area so as to minimize credit loss when transferring to George Mason University.

Communication. College personnel cited over 15 different methods by which they provide information to potential transfer students. But as one participant put it, "There's no lack of available information. What's difficult is getting it to students in a timely manner." The issue of timeliness came up often, for printed guides are only accurate as long as requirements stay the same. If program requirements change before a new guide is printed, the changes need to be conveyed to community-college personnel. Most importantly, counselors should be contacted, since as one counselor noted, "Students look to us as authority figures."

Faculty within disciplines need to communicate better. Where senior-college faculty make a practice of providing information to their two-year colleagues (such as Virginia Tech's engineering faculty), students noted few problems in transferring, including little loss of credits. Students cited many instances where discussions between faculty members might have avoided a problem. Mathematics courses were mentioned most frequently as examples of this. Students lost credit in mathematics because similar courses had different numbers, because

what is called developmental at community college was offered for college credit at a university, and because of different course content.

In response to the question, "What could community colleges do to improve transfer," a number of students urged better communication between two- and four-year college personnel. Students cited several examples where this has made a difference to them. They were particularly impressed by instances where their community-college counselor or advisor picked up the phone to seek clarification from their counterpart at the senior college while the student was sitting their office.

Committee members also heard of the importance of student-to-student communication. Several community colleges invite back alumni who have transferred to share experiences and advice with those considering transfer. These students are better able to convey pitfalls and solutions, for college staff often assume that students are more college-wise than students themselves feel.

Counseling and Advising. Another level of communication is between student and advisor. Across the sites, students suggested that community colleges could do a better job of advising, especially by being better informed about university requirements. College personnel in the audience were no doubt saying under their breath, "How often did you seek advice from a counselor?", for community-college students are notorious for self advising and, like all students, for not necessarily hearing what is told to them. In addition, community college counselors pointed out that they could only give advice to the extent that they had received accurate and timely information from senior institutions. These concerns raise questions about the effectiveness of a transfer-advising system that relies on printed transfer guides available only in counseling and division-chairs' offices.

Students seemed either pleased or displeased with the advising they received at senior colleges, depending on the site. Students from several universities relayed stories about experiencing difficulty in contacting their

advisors, and then in getting their time and attention. In specific regard to advice they received on transfer credit or courses, senior-college faculty, teaching assistants, part-time instructors, and assigned advisors were all given as examples of people who "had no idea." Satisfaction with advising did not appear to be related to whether the senior institution accepts many or only a few transfer students. When students were dissatisfied with their assigned advisor, they often found someone "who cared," and asked that person to be their advisor.

Adjustment Problems. For those students who admitted to experiencing problems in adjusting to the senior institution, the single most frequent response was that they found it more challenging academically. This reaction was not to uniform, however, since many students found their experiences "about the same," and one student found it easier at the senior institution. By and large, the students felt "very well" prepared by community college. "Four-year institutions should be taking notes from community colleges," remarked one transfer student.

Several students, however, noted specific deficiencies in their preparation. Most commonly cited was the amount of writing and research papers expected at four-year institutions. (This may be due, in part, to the fact that these students are now enrolled largely in upper-division courses.) Mention also was made of higher or different expectations in mathematics and in computer skills. At four of the sites, students reported that university professors required more reading, more books, and that reading of books be done on time. In general, community-college students found the four-year institutions more impersonal, the classes larger, the advising less good, and that the professors give less attention to teaching. These realities led several students to conclude that, upon transfer, one needs to become more independent.

At four of the sites, students described a problem that, while not uniquely theirs, may be exacerbated by their status as transfers. It appears that as many senior colleges, transfer students are last to be registered, behind not only continuing students but freshman as well, "I was a junior-freshman," is how one

student described it.

The problem of getting into required courses is particularly acute for those who transfer after completing a community-college degree, for they are then ready to begin major-program requirements and have little need for free-elective credits. For students who were still trying to ascertain which of their credits transferred or who were having problems finding housing or fitting in socially, the inability to get required courses contributed to a rocky adjustment period. Some students at some institutions described feeling like second-class citizens during their first semester. The discrimination was subtle rather than overt, stemming from such things as being last in line for registration and the inability to obtain on-campus housing.

Barriers. College staff offered dozens of different perspectives on what barriers confront potential transfer students. If one word characterizes a number of responses, it would be uncertainty. This uncertainty takes two forms: uncertainty on the part of students, who may try to keep their options open or who fail to plan adequately, and uncertainty about what is expected of them. Students may wish to plan their community-college studies around the requirements of a single four-year college but are aware that they have no guarantee of being admitted to that institution.

Another great source of uncertainty is the issue of the transferability (or lack thereof) of AAS (occupational-technical) degrees. Many students decide well into an AAS program that they wish to transfer, leaving college personnel with the dubious task of explaining that maybe some of their credits will transfer to some senior colleges in some programs. "Students want guarantees about what will transfer," reported several counselors, "but we just cant's say for sure in all cases."

Articulation Agreements. Currently, any number of articulation agreements are in place around the state. At one end of the spectrum, several senior colleges have signed statewide agreements with the Virginia Community College

System to the effect that, once accepted, community-college graduates will have their general-education requirements waived. At the other end of the spectrum are numerous program-to-program articulation agreements between a single community college and four-year institution.

The responses from college personnel to a question at the ODU/NSU hearing about the effectiveness of these agreements summarizes the general feeling about them: "Not effective; good; generally effective; very effective; varies." At their best, "articulation agreements take the stress out of counseling potential transfer students," remarked one community-college Counselor. Many praised the statewide agreements recently agreed to by JMU and VSU. Others expressed strong sentiment for more agreements like GMU's, which guarantees admission to graduates who complete certain requirements.

The shortcomings of articulation agreements are numerous, however. These include:

* the lack of uniformity among agreements;
* most do not guarantee admission even if a student complies with the requirements of the agreement;
* individual schools may require additional general education courses;
* students do not really enter as juniors, since specific departmental requirements must be taken at the senior institution;
* lower-level prerequisites may not be offered at community college;
* there is confusion among students about what constitutes a transfer degree;
* Faculty may not be aware of agreements for advising purposes; and
* agreements become outdated.

To quote one community-college administrator, "If the agreement is only a license to hunt, much like a parking permit on a university campus, then the agreement is not particularly useful."

In answer to the question why there are so few statewide agreements, the most frequent response was that senior institutions are concerned about disparities (in academic quality or content) among the community colleges.

Interestingly, this answer came by and large from community college people. Other reasons included that senior-college requirements vary so much, that the definition of general education is ambiguous, and that faculty and departmental autonomy intervenes.

Community-college personnel suggested the need for greater uniformity in the agreements. Senior colleges should get away from analyzing transfer records course-by-course and instead accept general-education requirements across the board. Several suggested the problem could be solved by having the community college agree on a common general-education core that would be accepted by all senior institutions in fulfillment of their individual general-education requirements. Such an arrangement would require some accommodation on the part of senior institutions, they acknowledged. But the existence of statewide agreements in other states raised a question in their minds about why it could not be done in Virginia.

The Associate Degree. If the current approach to statewide agreements is pursued, then much rests on whether students complete associate transfer degrees. Of those interviewed, 57 percent of the students did graduate and 43 percent did not. The most common reasons given for completing the degree where (1) because of an articulation agreement, and (2) that the student would "have something" if he or she was unsuccessful in getting a baccalaureate. Several graduates expressed regret that they had completed a degree, since a number of their credits ended up not transferring or transferring only as electives. Others said they wanted the degree even though they knew not all the credits would count toward their baccalaureate degree.

Primary reasons for not graduating were that students only wanted to stay at the community college long enough to be prepared for transferring and because they did not want to lose credits that would not transfer.

College staff also are ambivalent about whether to advise students to complete a transfer degree. The discussions reveal that senior colleges offer students both incentives and disincentives to graduate from community college.

Major incentives come from those universities that have signed statewide articulation agreements and from some of the more selective senior institutions, which look more favorably upon those who have graduated. As one admissions officer said, "We feel we have more of an obligation to them."

The disincentives are many. Senior institutions may limit the number of transfer credits they will accept, which may exceed the number required to graduate; students transferring in as juniors may have last choice in registering for required courses; most will not accept credits from persons completing occupational/technical degrees; and some programs accept far fewer general-education courses than are required for the degree. Other problems arise because community colleges cannot offer a full array of "sophomore-level" courses, especially in professional fields. Also, courses required for graduation may be offered only once a year, which could delay a student's admission to a baccalaureate institution by a full year. As one community-college counselor characterized the situation, "As people who work at community colleges, we'd like students to get the degree. But we have to do what's best for the student, and it might not be in their best interest to graduate."

Advice from Students. After having endured the challenges of transfer, students interviewed had a number of suggestions for improvement. Most frequently heard was the word uniformity. Uniformity in community-college courses and in what four-year schools require were urged, as well as uniformity in course numbering for basic and introductory-level courses and uniformity in what is covered in these courses. Several students suggested that all institutions be required to provide the kind of program-specific transfer sheets used by George Mason University.

Most interesting was the advice they say they would give to students considering transfer, for it sounds much like what college personnel would urge. Across the sites, students recommended that those contemplating transfer should start planning early, find out everything they can, talk to and go visit university staff, then plan their program of study at the community college based

on what they had learned. As one student put it, "Ask questions of everyone."

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